

Slavey language

Slavey (/ˈsleɪvi/^[4] also **Slave**, **Slavé**) is an Athabaskan language spoken among the Slavey and Sahtu people of Canada in the Northwest Territories where it also has official status.^[5] The language is written using Canadian Aboriginal syllabics or the Latin script.

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Slavey	
<i>Dene K'e</i>	
Native to	Canada
Region	Northwest Territories
Ethnicity	Slavey, Sahtu
<div>Native speakers</div>	2,120, 65% of ethnic population (2016 census) ^[1]
<div>Language family</div>	<div>Dené–Yeniseian? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Na-Dené<ul style="list-style-type: none">Athabaskan<ul style="list-style-type: none">Northern Athabaskan<ul style="list-style-type: none">Slavey</div>
Official status	
<div>Official language in</div>	North and South Slavey both official in Northwest Territories (Canada) ^[2]
Language codes	
ISO 639-2	den (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=113)
ISO 639-3	den – inclusive code <div>Individual codes: <div>scs – North Slavey</div> <div>xs1 – South Slavey</div> </div>
Glottolog	slav1253 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/slav1253) ^[3]

North Slavey and South Slavey

North Slavey (*Sahtúot' ɣnɛ Yatɣ*) is spoken by the Sahtu (North Slavey) people in the Mackenzie District along the middle Mackenzie River from Tulita (Fort Norman) north, around Great Bear Lake, and in the Mackenzie Mountains of the Canadian territory of Northwest Territories. The dialect has around 800 speakers.^[1]

Northern Slavey is an amalgamation of three separate *dialects*:

- ɓʒɔɔɔ' ɔ K'áshogot'iné (Hare, spoken by the *Gahwié got'iné* - "Rabbit-skin People" or *K'áshogot'ine* - "Great Hare People", referring to their dependence on the varying hare for food and clothing, also called *Peaux de Lievre* or *Locheaux*)
- ɣɔɔ'ɔɔ'ɔ Sahtúgot'iné (Bear Lake, spoken by the *Sahtu Dene* or *Sahtú got'iné* - "Bear Lake People", also known as *Gens du Lac d'Ours*)
- ɔ'ɔɔ'ɔ Shihgot'ine (Mountain, spoken by the *Shihgot'iné*, *Shuhtaot'iné* or *Shotah Dene* - "Mountain People" or *Mountain Indians*, also called *Nahagot'iné*, *Nahaa* or *Nahane Dene* - "People of the west", so called because they lived in the mountains west of the other Slavey groups, between the Mackenzie Mountains and the Mackenzie River, from the Redstone River to the Mountain River)

South Slavey (ᑭᑭᑭ *Dene-thah*, *Dené Dháh* or *Dene Zhaté*) is spoken by the Slavey people, which were also known as *Dehghaot'ine*, *Deh Cho*, *Etchareottine* - "People Dwelling in the Shelter", in the region of Great Slave Lake, upper Mackenzie River (*Deh Cho* - "Big River") and its drainage, in the District of Mackenzie, northeast Alberta, northwest British Columbia.

Some communities are bilingual, with the children learning Slavey at home and English when they enter school. Still other communities are monolingual in Slavey ^[6] The dialect has around 1000 speakers.^[1]

Alternate names: Slavi, Slave, Dené, Mackenzian

The division of Slavey dialects is based largely on the way each one pronounces the old Proto-Athapaskan sounds *dz *ts *ts' *s and *z.

Phonology

Consonants

		Labial	Alveolar	Lateral	Postalveolar	Velar / palatal	Glottal
Plosive	plain	p	t			k	ʔ
	aspirated		tʰ			kʰ	
	ejective		tʼ			kʼ	
Affricate	plain		ts	tɬ	tʃ		
	aspirated		tsʰ	tɬʰ	tʃʰ		
	ejective		tsʼ	tɬʼ	tʃʼ		
Fricative	voiceless		s	ɬ	ʃ	x	h
	voiced		z	ɮ	ʒ	ɣ	
Nasal		m	n				
Approximant		w				j	

The consonant inventories in the dialects of Slavey differ considerably. The table above lists the 30 consonants common to most or all varieties. Hare lacks aspirated affricates (on red background), which have lenited into fricatives, whereas Mountain lacks /w/ (on blue). In addition, for some speakers of Hare, an alveolar flap /ɾ/ has developed into a separate phoneme.

The most pronounced difference is however the realization of a series of consonants that varies greatly in their place of articulation.^[7]



Sahtu (North Slavey) communities in the Northwest Territories



North Slavey text carved in to stone in Yellowknife

	Slavey proper	Mountain	Bearlake	Hare
Plain stop/affricate	t̪θ	p	k ^w	k ^w , p
Aspirated	t̪θ ^h	p ^h	k ^w h	f
Ejective	t̪θ'	p'	k ^w '	ʔw
Voiceless fricative	θ	f	ɸ	w
Voiced fricative / semivowel	ð	v	w	w

In Slavey proper, these are dental affricates and fricatives; comparative Athabaskan work reveals this to be the oldest sound value. Mountain has labials, with the voiceless stop coinciding with pre-existing /p/. Bearlake has labialized velars, but has lenited the voiced fricative to coincide with pre-existing /w/. The most complicated situation is found in Hare, where the plain stop is a labialized velar, the ejective member is replaced by a /ʔw/ sequence, the aspirated affricate has turned into a fricative /f/, and both the voiceless and voiced fricatives have been lenited to /w/.

Phonological processes

The following phonological and phonetic statements apply to all four dialects of Slavey.

- Unaspirated obstruents are either voiceless or weakly voiced, e.g.
 - /k/ → [k] or [k̚]
- Aspirated obstruents are strongly aspirated.
- Ejectives are strongly ejective.
- When occurring between vowels, ejectives are often voiced, e.g.
 - /k' / → [g̚'] or [k']
- /t̪s^h/ is usually strongly velarized, i.e. [t̪x].
- Velar obstruents are palatalized before front vowels, e.g.
 - /kɛ/ → [cɛ]
 - /xɛ/ → [çɛ]
 - /ɣɛ/ → [j̥ɛ]
- Velar fricatives may be labialized before round vowels.
 - The voiceless fricative is usually labialized, e.g.
 - /xo/ → [x^wo]
 - The voiced fricative is optionally labialized and may additionally be defricated e.g.
 - /ɣo/ → [ɣo] or [ɣ^wo] or [wo]
- Velar stops are also labialized before round vowels. These labialized velars are not as heavily rounded as labial velars (which occur in Bearlake and Hare), e.g.
 - /ko/ → [k^wo]
 - /k^wo/ → [k̚^wwo]
- Lateral affricates are generally alveolar, but sometimes velar, i.e.
 - /t̪ɬ/ → [t̪ɬ] or [k̪ɬ]
 - /t̪ɬ^h/ → [t̪ɬ^h] or [k̪ɬ^h]
 - /t̪ɬ' / → [t̪ɬ'] or [k̪ɬ']
- /x/ may be velar or glottal, i.e.
 - /x/ → [x] or [h]

Vowels

- a [a]
- e [ɛ]
- ə [e] or [ie]
- i [i]
- o [o]
- u [u]

- nasal vowels are marked with an ogonek accent, e.g. ⟨ą⟩ [ã]
- South Slavey does not have the ⟨ə⟩ vowel.

Tone

Slavey has two tones:

- high
- low

In Slavey orthography, high tone is marked with an acute accent, and low tone is unmarked.

Tones are both lexical and grammatical.

Lexical: /gáh/ 'along' vs. /gàh/ 'rabbit'

Syllable structure

Slavey morphemes have underlying syllable structures in the stems: CV, CVC, CVnC, V, and VC. The prefixes of the stem occur as Cv, CVC, VC, CV, and C.

Stem structure	Example	English gloss
CV	tu	"water"
CVC	ʔah	"snowshoe"
CVnC	mɪ́h	"net"
V	-e	Postposition
VC	-éh	"with"

[6]

Prefix structure	Example	English gloss
CV	de-	inceptive
CVC	teh-	"into water"
V	í-	seriative
VC	ah-	second-person singular subject
C	h-	classifier (voice element)

[6]

Morphology

Slavey, like many Athabascan languages, has a very specific morpheme order in the verb in which the stem must come last. The morpheme order is shown in the following chart.

Position	Description
Position 000	Adverb
Position 00	Object of incorporated postposition
Position 0	Incorporated postposition
Position 1	Adverbial
Position 2	Distributive (yá-)
Position 3	Customary (na-)
Position 4	Incorporated stem
Position 5	Number
Position 6	Direct Object
Position 7	Deictic
Position 8	Theme/derivation
Position 9	Aspect/derivation
Position 10	Conjugation
Position 11	Mode
Position 12	Subject
Position 13	Classifier
Position 14	Stem

[6]

A Slavey verb must minimally have positions 13 and 14 to be proper. Here are some examples:[6]

xayadedhti						
Morphemes	xa	ya	de	d	h	tí
Position	1	1	9	13	13	14
Translation	'S/he prayed'					

godee			
Morphemes	go	Ø	deeh
Position	6	13	14
Translation	'S/he talks'		

dagodee				
Morphemes	da	go	Ø	dee
Position	4	6	13	14
Translation	'S/he stutters'			

Person, number and gender

Gender

Slavey marks gender by means of prefixation on the verb theme. There are three different genders, one of which is unmarked; the other two are marked by prefixes **[go-]** and **[de-]**. However, only certain verb themes allow gender prefixes.[6]

[go-] is used for nouns which mark location in either time or space. The gender pronoun can be a direct object, an oblique object or a possessor. Here are examples of each:[6]

- *kýé godetl'éh*

house 3 paints area

“S/he is painting the house”

- *kóé gocha*

house area.in shelter

“in the shelter of the house”

- *kóé godesh ȳtée*

house area.floor

“floor of the house”

Some examples of these areal nouns are house (kóé), land (déh), river (deh), and winder (xay).^[6]

[de-] marks wood, leaves and branches. This gender is optional: some speakers use it and others do not. Examples of its use are as follows:^[6]

- *Tse dɛla*

Wood

“wood is located”

- *ʔókʼay tʼoge déʔɔ*

Bird nest wooden O is located

“A bird’s nest is located”

- *Tse tsʼedehtlá*

Wood 3split wood

“S/he is splitting wood”

Number

Slavey marks number in the subject prefixes in position 12. The dual is marked by the prefix ɬéh- (Sl)/le- (Bl)/le- (Hr).

- *nɬégetthe*

“They two got stuck in a narrow passage”

The plural is marked with the prefix go-.

- *Dahgogethe*

They dance

- *ʔehágonídhe*

“we go for meat”

Person

Slavey has first, second, third, and fourth person. When in position 12, acting as a subject, first-person singular is /h-/, second-person singular is /ne-/, first-person dual/plural is /ɬd-/, and second person plural is marked by /ah-/. Third person is not marked in this position. When occurring as a direct or indirect object, the pronoun prefixes change and fourth person becomes relevant. First-person singular takes se-. Second-person singular takes ne- Third person is marked by be-/me- Fourth person is marked by ye-^[6]

Classification

Like most Athabaskan languages, Slavey has a multitude of classifications. There are five basic categories that describe the nature of an object. Some of these categories are broken up further.^[6]

Class	Description	Locative prefix	Active Prefix	Examples
1a	One dimensional slender, rigid and elongated objects	Ø-to	Ø -tǐ, -tǒ, -tǒ	gun, canoe, pencil
1b	One directions flexible objects, ropelike; plurals	Ø -ǝa	Ø -ǝee, -ǝa, -ǝee	thread, snowshoes, rope
2a	two dimensional flexible	h-chú	h-chuh, -chú, -chu	open blanket, open tent, paper
2b	Two dimensional rigid objects	N/A	N/A	no specific lexical item
3	Solid roundish objects; chunky objects	Ø -ʔǒ	Ø -ʔáh, -ʔǒ, -ʔá	ball, rock, stove, loaf of bread
4a	Small containerful	Ø -kǒ	Ø -káh, -kǒ, -kah	pot of coffee, puppies in a basket, cup of tea
4b	Large containerful	h-tǒ	h-tǐh, -tǒ, tǒ	full gas tank, bucket of water, bag of flour
5	Animate	Ø -tǐ	Ø -téh, -tǐ, -té, h-téh, -tǐ	Any living thing

Example:

- *tewhehchú*

Water classifier

"A clothlike object is in the water"^[6]

Tense and aspect

Tense

Slavey has only one structural tense: future. Other tenses can be indicated periphrastically.^[6]

An immediate future can be formed by de- inceptive in position 9 plus y-

- *dale*

3 fut.start out

"s/he is just ready to go"

- *nadedajéh*

3 fut.start to heal

"it is just starting to heal"

Aspect

Slavey has two semantic aspects: perfective and imperfective.

Perfective is represented in position 11.

Examples:

- *déhtla*

3 pf.start off

"S/he started off."

- *whá goyǰdee*

long 3 pf.talk

"S/he talked for a long time."

The perfective can also be used with a past tense marker to indicate that at the point of reference, which is sometime in the past, the event was completed^[6]

- *Kǫ́e gohtsǝ*

hose 3 pf.build area PAST

“He had built a house”

Imperfective indicates that the reference time precedes the end of the event time.

- *Hejj*

3 imp.sing

“s/he sing, s/he is singing”

- *Kǫ́e gohtsǝ begháyeyidá*

house 3 imp.build area 1sg. pf.see 3

“I saw him building a house”

Word order

Slavey is a verb-final language. The basic word order is SOV.^[6]

Examples:

- *Dene ?elá thehtsǝ*

Man boat made

"The man made the boat"

- *tlǝ ts'òdani káyǝta*

dog child bit

"The dog bit the child"

Oblique objects precede the Direct object.^[6]

Example:

- *T'eere denǝ gha ?erákee?ee wihsǝ*

girl mother for parka made.

"The girl made a parka for her mother."

Case

Slavey has no case markings. To differentiate between subject, direct object, and oblique objects, word order is used. The subject will be the first noun phrase, and the direct object will occur right before the verb. The oblique objects are controlled by postpositions.^[6]

Possessives ^[6]

Possessive pronoun prefixes are found in Slavey. These pronouns have the same forms as the direct and oblique object pronouns. The prefixes are listed below with examples.

se- first-person singular

- *bá*

“mitts”

- *sebáré*

“my mitts”

- *mbeh*

“knife”

- *sembehé*

“my knife

ne- second-person singular

- *ts’ah*

“hat”

- *net’saré*

“your sg. hat”

- *tl’uh*

“rope”

- *netl’ulé*

“your sg. rope”

be-/me- third-person singular

- *mejé nátlá*

3.dog. possessive 3 is fast

“His/her dog is fast.”

- *bekée whihtsj*

3.slippers.possessive 1sg. Made

“I made his/her slippers.”

ye- fourth person

- *yekée whehtsj*

4. slippers.possessive 3 made

“S/he made his/her slippers.”

ʔe- unspecified possessor

- *ʔeljé*

“someone's dog”

naxe-/raxe- first-person plural, second-person plural.

- *Ts’éré*

“blanket”

- *naxets’éré*

“our blanket, your pl. blanket”

ku-/ki-/go- third-person plural

- *kulíé rala*

3pl.dog.possessive 3 is fast

"Their dog is fast."

- *goyúé k'ená ?enihtse*

3pl.clothes.possessive 1sg. washed

"I washed their clothes."

Clauses

Conjunctions

There are both coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in Slavey.

Coordinating

gots'éh "and, and then"

- *tse tádihtth i gots'ę goyii naehddhi*

wood 1sg. cut and area.in 1sg. warmed

"I cut some wood and then I warmed myself up inside."

- *dene ?éhdá jíye kanjwę gots'ę ?éhdá da ?u ?a*

people some berry 3 picks and some 3 opt.fish

"Some people will pick berries and some will fish."

kúlú, kólí, kúú, kóó, ékóó, góa "but"

- *?ekq náohthlah nehthę góa nehji*

there 1sg. opt.go 1sg. want but 1sg. be afraid

"I want to go there but I'm afraid."

- *sine ts'ódane gogháiidá kúlú dedine gołj ?ajá*

1sg. child 1sg. saw 3pl. but 3sg. instead 3 became

"I was supposed to watch the children but he did it instead."

Subordinating conjunctions

?enjdé, njdé, ndé, néh "if, when, whenever"

- *?jts'é gehk'é njdé segħa máhsi*

moose 3pl. shoot if 1sg.for thanks

"If they shoot a moose, I'll be grateful."

- *dora bekwí ohts'í njwę njdé yehts'í*

3. head 1sg.opt.comb 3 wants of 3 combs 4

"Whenever Dora wants to comb my hair, she combs it."

-were "before"

- *shuruhté were selejée daderéʔ ɔ ʔagúlá*

1sg. opt.go to sleep before woodbox 3 is full 1sg. made area

“Before I went to bed, I filled to woodbox.”

-ts'ə “since, from”

- *segǫtj gots'ə jɔ deneilé*

1sg. was born area.from here 1sg. lived

“I lived here since I was born.”

-hé “because, so”

- *se wehse yihé godihk'ɔ yíle2*

wood 3 is wet because 1sg. make fire NEG

“Because the wood is wet, I can't make fire.”

[6]

Relative clauses

There are three important parts to a relative clause. There is the head, which is the noun that is modified or delimited. The second part is the restricting sentence. The sentence modifies the head noun. The last part is the complementizer.^[6]

- *ʔeyi [dene] goyidee I híshá*

The man 1sg. talked COMP 3 is tall

“the man whom I talked to is tall.”

- *lɪ gah hedéhfe I gháyeyidá*

dog rabbit 3 chased COMP 1sg. saw

“I saw the dog that chased the rabbit.”

Status

North and South Slavey are recognized as official languages of the Northwest Territories; they may be used in court and in debates and proceedings of the Northwest Territories legislature. However, unlike English and French, the government only publishes laws and documents in North and South Slavey if the legislature requests it, and these documents are not authoritative.^[8]

In 2015, a Slavey woman named Andrea Heron challenged the territorial government over its refusal to permit the ʔ character, representing the Slavey glottal stop, in her daughter's name, Sakaeʔah, despite Slavey languages being official in the NWT. The territory argued that territorial and federal identity documents were unable to accommodate the character. Heron had registered the name with a hyphen instead of the ʔ when her daughter was born, but when Sakaeʔah was 6, Ms. Heron joined a challenge by a Chipewyan woman named Shene Catholique-Valpy regarding the same character in her own daughter's name, Sahaiʔa.^[9]

Also in 2015, the University of Victoria launched a language revitalization program in the NWT, pairing learners of indigenous languages including Slavey with fluent speakers. The program requires 100 hours of conversation with the mentor with no English allowed, as well as sessions with instructors in Fort Providence.^[10]

In popular culture

Slavey was the native language spoken by the fictional band in the Canadian television series *North of 60*. Nick Sibbeston, a former Premier of the Northwest Territories, was a Slavey language and culture consultant for the show.

See also

- Broken Slavey

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